BECKMAN
GILLESPIE

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WILLIAM BECKMAN

GREGORY GILLESPIE

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La Jolla, California

August 18
through
October 7, 1984

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THE ART OF WILLIAM BECKMAN AND GREGORY GILLESPIE

The best realist paintings of our time must inevitably stand comparison to the best abstract paintings of our time, abstract art having set qualitative standards that have not altered appreciably since they were initially articulated on canvas in the late forties and early fifties. This may not seem to be the case, because (1) the New York School is widely assumed to have become history, its attitude eclipsed by attitudes more current, its participants for the most part dead, its story written; (2) with but a handful of exceptions, our best living abstract painters have been unable to sustain the vitality of their earlier achievements, allowing the impression that the abstractionist legacy has been depleted and causing many to use the term postmodernism to signal its demise; and (3) much realist-type painting springs — or is described as springing — from a reactionary attitude in relation to abstraction, meaning it wants to be charted by its own set of ground rules, not those distilled from Abstract Expressionism. The problem, however, is that the old pictures won't go away, though housed mostly in museums, they won't yield to history as a closed experience. Their high seriousness, passion, and personalized vision continue to feel not lost to us, but urgently relevant, not artifacts of a distant world, but expressions of our own world and of ourselves. Nor, for that matter, will their predecessors go away, that is, those painters of the earlier 20th century, or of the 19th century, who made visible the terms of modern experience in the first place, the facts of our problematic relation to the world and of the necessity of locating ourselves from the inside out. Within this context, the realist painter may wish to restrict the critical gamut to relevant examples, but art experience — the involuntary responses we have in front of pictures — doesn't allow that, and even if it did, the Old Masters would still be lurking in the background, resonating standards that, like it or not, would sooner or later come to bear on today's art

Few of our current realists have chosen to confront the qualitative challenge of the New York School, preferring instead either to dismiss that painting as being "formalist" or cavalierly acknowledging its influence via loose paint handling, frontality, an expressive use of color, and largeness of size and scale, all essentially formal qualities anyway. Establishing such connections between realist and abstract painting is surely acceptable, a routine application of routine art historical methodology, but it employs a conventional understanding of style, one that draws attention to superficial likenesses instead of dealing with the underlying character — the meaning — of a particular artistic enterprise. Any discussion of Abstract Expressionism, for instance, must take into account that generation's clash with European modernism, a clash born at once out of high regard and deep dissatisfaction, and its relentless drive to create an American art whose ambition and seriousness could match anything Europe had to offer We can trace Surrealist distortions and Cubist flatness in painting after painting made in New York in the 1940s, but doing so does not account for the bristling energy and the terrible restlessness of those pictures, any more than it accounts for their peculiarly American artlessness. Here, style must be approached not head-on, but obliquely, which is the way our best painters have always approached it — not as an end in itself, but, rather, by allowing it to accrue as a by-product of a desperate urge to get at the spiritual reality embodied in the physical thing, be it the human figure, a common object, or pigment itself.

William Beckman and Gregory Gillespie are two of our finest realist painters, their works as compelling as any produced in our time. The artists have been close friends for more than a decade, regularly visiting one another's studios to share impressions of recent pictures, bound further by a common interest in the Old Masters who embody the Northern tradition — the Dutch, the Flemish, the Germans, and, in Gillespie's case, the North Italians as well, particularly Mantegna and Crivelli. Their paintings are characteristically worked in close and meticulous detail; they include large as well as small formats; and their subjects range from landscape to the human figure. Each is nonetheless his own painter in possession of his own vision, Beckman's inclining toward order and discipline, Gillespie's toward rupture and spontaneity, though each has a measure of the other in him. They may on one level be the Apollo and Dionysus among our realists, but thought and feeling are not finally isolated in their respective achievements.

BY CARL BELZ

Beckman's mature art was initially based exclusively on the human figure, either self-portraits or portraits of his wife, Diana; one portrait, included in the present exhibition, is of Diana and the Beckmans' daughter, Deidra, but self and spouse are the essential and recurrent subjects of the work. Beckman's interest in the figure emerged in the early sixties while he was an undergraduate at Saint Cloud University in Minnesota. His painting was abstract at the time and consisted of open fields with single, undifferentiated slabs or monoliths rising in them. An encounter with a traveling exhibition of Bay Area figure painting at the Walker Art Center encouraged the metamorphosis of the slabs into single figures: "The people who appealed to me the most were Oliveira, Diebenkorn, and Bischoff, those three, and maybe a little Park. That's the way I was painting, the way I was taking my abstract pictures: the monolithic form was coming up from the bottom and was turning itself into a figure the longer and longer I worked on it; it was becoming a lone figure in a large space, which is what all the Oliveiras were."[1] Influential, too, was a Larry Rivers retrospective that toured the country in 1965–66 and was hosted by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts: "The show had the *Double Portrait of Berdie* in it, which had a big impact on me. I was already leaning toward the figure at that point, doing big, Bischoff-type, voluptuous female nudes, lone nudes against very abstract landscapes. Many of Rivers' paintings looked like he did them from life, and that had a powerful influence on people wanting to move to the figure."

The paintings Beckman refers to gave way by the later sixties to a series of more closely rendered single figures situated in interior spaces, the images physically enclosed in small, three-dimensional boxes that included sheets of polished aluminum or mirrors in order to create multiple perspective effects. "I found three boxes in a dump and dragged them home. They were just boxes that some hardware store had thrown out. They were closed on five sides and had glass on the sixth. They just sat in my studio for about six months, until I started putting drawings on the back wall and polished aluminum on the side walls, a carry-over from minimalism. From here, I started making my own boxes out of hardwood, changing the medium to oil and the construction to fit my imagined perspectives. The boxes were very conceptual, extremely sparse and extremely bare, and they kept you away from them — all of the figures are turned to the back, or they're in profile or three-quarter view; none of them come right at you, because they're physically and spiritually enclosed in that space. They're sort of like worlds within themselves."

Small, intimate, shy — introspective, to use Beckman's word — the boxes were technically accomplished, but they failed to satisfy the artist's developing ambition: "They had multiple perspective points, so they were very intriguing architectural boxes to look at, but people were looking at them more for the constructions and for the incredible perspectives I was getting. No one was looking at the figure, no one was looking at what was going on in the box — at the painting, the image."

So Beckman began to take steps to ensure that his paintings would be addressed as paintings, first in a handful of diptychs and triptychs, and then, with increasing force and clarity, in the self-portraits and the portraits of Diana to which he dedicated himself during the 1970s. And to which she dedicated herself as well. Diana Beckman is the subject of six major paintings completed since the early seventies — four of her alone, one with her daughter, and one with her husband — not to mention countless preparatory drawings and sketches. Each of the paintings required a year or more to complete, easily a thousand hours of modeling insofar as the artist works entirely from direct observation. Each entailed relentless day-to-day encounters demanding uncommon endurance and unyielding commitment, and for artist and model alike, each thus represents an extraordinary undertaking bearing extraordinary personal and esthetic implications. Not surprisingly, William and Diana Beckman are both distance runners, and both have met the challenge of the Boston and New York City marathons with impressive times of under three hours. "You're alone, an individual competing, if anything, against time, but rarely against other runners. You're really running against an event and against exhaustion. You know you're going to be exhausted at the end; you know you're going to hurt; and you know that after 20 miles you're going to be in the kind of pain you would never have to endure if you weren't in a race. Everything in your body tells you to stop, because you've used up all of your energy, and it's time to rest and rejuvenate. But the race is 26 miles, not 20, so you have to go another 6 miles, and you know that every step is going to be one more painful step, but you keep doing it

because there's that object at the end, that goal, and that realization that you will have achieved the event. You'll have made it to the apex of the pyramid. My kind of painting is like that. It's a lone effort, an individual effort; you contain yourself, you contain your emotions, and yet you can still achieve your goal — you are still able to express and to communicate your emotions." This statement by the artist could have been made with equal authority by his wife, for they know equally, yet individually, the requirements of long-distance running and long-distance painting.

The requirements in painting were in part technical, a matter of the artist teaching himself how to articulate with brush and pigment what he saw in the mirror or in the model before him. Selected Old Masters provided direction: "The first painter I studied seriously was Vermeer. I tried to repaint his pictures visually or intellectually, not physically, not by copying them, but by going through the procedures of how he laid the paint on, how he started out with the drawing, what he saw and how he saw it. Van Eyck was the other painter I analyzed in this way. I felt that my expression would lie somewhere between Vermeer and van Eyck . . . and maybe Ingres and Holbein. Those four were my early masters, the people I was studying the most. Whenever I got a chance to see any of their works, even when it meant driving a great distance or making a sacrifice, I would try to get at them — just to go through the procedure of repainting them in my mind. That's how I learned how to paint, how I learned my technique." Consulting the Old Masters, however, was occasionally spurred by more specific painting problems: "Trying to paint blond hair was one of the most difficult things I could ever imagine. I couldn't do it, so I started looking at other painters, and I couldn't find a single painter who could do it. Nobody could paint blond hair the way blond hair really is. It *is* substance, it *is* something, it *has* a color, but you can't put your finger on what color it is, because it's transparent. It just reflects a lot of colors, and you see the other colors through it. There doesn't seem to be a color that's blond that will pick up blond. To this day, I haven't found a painter I really thought did justice to blond hair, though a few of them have made pretty good stabs at it — Durer, for instance, and Holbein." But in all cases, Beckman perceived the learning process as his alone: "When I went to museums, I went by myself. Actually, I still do that; I don't even like going to museums with my wife. If you have the kind of mind I do, you tend to put blinders on when you're trying to learn. So I would go to the Met, or drive to Boston, or drive to Washington to see one or two pictures I thought I could learn from; and I wouldn't want to know about anything else in the museum."

We tend to think of technique as a tool employed to accomplish a task, as if without feeling, other than desire to get the job done. With abstract art, we allow latitude here, assuming that changes and adjustments are natural and are naturally accompanied by concerns about making the picture *work,* as artists say. With realist art, by comparison — particularly realist art that has the finish and resolution of Beckman's —we see an image we take for granted was there in front of the painter and had only to be accomplished, the finishing process essentially a matter of patient execution. For Beckman, however, the dynamics of building a picture are highly complex, volatile, and radically opposed to the process of mechanically covering a surface from the upper left corner to the lower right, a practice not uncommon in art-making today. "I couldn't paint that way. I don't know how one could visualize the thing all the way through without playing one area off another. For me, a great deal of the thrill of painting is just realizing it, getting it to the point where you see it, and everybody else sees it, for the first time. After I work on a painting for a month or two, I can't resist bringing one spot up, realizing one spot, knowing perfectly well that that spot will have to be brought up again once I start bringing up other spots. So I'll be bringing up areas throughout the picture, and that's when it starts to grow and to dictate some of the emotion, some of the final image and the final response. But making every area compare favorably with the one I'm working on, or the one I've already brought up, also makes it difficult to know when to stop. I try to reach the point where I think everything has been equally realized, but I still have trouble finishing them, and I have a feeling that those pictures that are out in the world, signed, could be taken further and that I'd probably go back into them if they came back to my studio. But then they'd be different paintings, totally different. It wouldn't be a matter of just finishing them, or polishing them higher, or making them more realistic — it would be a matter of making a new painting."

That the process is volatile accounts for the fact that nearly all of Beckman's figure paintings are executed on wood panels. "You have to remember that, in my case, I'm working on it just about every day for over a year. If you take all the emotions that you're capable of experiencing in that time and you put them on that surface, some of them are going to be violent; and some of them are going to be real violent to the surface itself. I have, out of anger or frustration at not being able to achieve what I know I should be able to, thrown things at my paintings — palette knives, screwdrivers, brushes, etc., so the panels at times are scarred up. I once threw a can of paint as hard as I could right at a painting; I didn't care where it hit, and fortunately it didn't hit the face. It crushed the can, and the rim gouged the panel. When I calmed down, I had to fill it in and build the surface back up; but you can still see the outline if you know where to look. I mean, I could have hid it, I could have gotten rid of it entirely, sanded it out so it would have been just as smooth as the rest; but I sort of like the idea that it's there, a little reminder that that is part of the picture process. That's why the paintings are on wood; a canvas would be in shreds at the end of a year."

Self and spouse and daughter, the charged atmosphere of dealing daily with subjects known intimately, shifting feelings, expressing, and seemingly endless hours spent working with the surface, changing the image, bringing it up, realizing it fully. These are Beckman's figure paintings, and slow paintings they are — slow in coming about and slow in yielding their content. They present lone figures, but never figures who are lonely, for they are in each case assertive, confident, in control of the spaces they occupy. Even in pairs, their independence eclipses the bonds between them, for they are allowed no idle preoccupations, no gestures, no narrative context to distract from their being first of all before us. They are taut and confrontational, serious, intense — as intense as the process that brought them into being. They are knowable, but not in any easy manner, for their feelings are contained, rendered into essences through months of detached yet responsive observation. This helps to explain why Beckman's figures don't always look like their subjects, a phenomenon that occasionally astonishes the artist: They are beings whose personalities have been distilled to present dense complexes of feelings and attitudes, large chunks of lives rather than particular moments or isolated moods. Hence, their Apollonian character and the fact that they read like paintings instead of snapshots that have been translated into paint. You can walk past them if you choose; but if you elect to encounter them, they will respond to all you are willing to offer in a one-to-one communication.

Beckman's interest in landscape painting dates from 1970, though it has intensified and become constant only during the past four or five years. The interest is natural, for he was raised on a farm in Minnesota, and his eagerness to pursue it was embedded in the decision to move his own family from Manhattan to Dutchess County, New York, in 1974. "The landscapes started when we went to my parents' farm in Minnesota. We went in part for a vacation, but partly because I wanted to do some landscapes. I had never done any — I mean not directly from nature — so I simply got on my father's tractor and drove out in the fields and painted what was right in front of me. At first, I wasn't trying to do anything with the pictures — I wasn't trying to find a specific site or make a statement, I just wanted to paint." He also wanted to open and expand his art: "I felt the color in my figure paintings needed to be lifted, and the landscapes also got me to see things that were further away than eight feet, which is where my models were posing. I had to work at something that was half a mile away or a mile away, and I really liked that."

The move to Dutchess County coincided with a focusing of Beckman's interest on particular landscape subjects: "I wanted a place with working farms that still functioned, that had cattle, silos, and machinery, that were still exploiting the land, so to speak — not farms you would visit on Thanksgiving Day to see your grandmother. I also wanted that hassle between the environmentalist and the farmer. It doesn't surface very often in the Eastern press, but you get it endlessly in the Midwest: the chemical fertilizers they put on the ground, the way they push down every tree or use a bulldozer to straighten out a stream that meanders through a field, the way they run a power line right across the land if they want electricity. And I fell in love with the big Harvester silos which are all over this area. They're a deep blue-black color, they're very tall, they have an ominous feeling, they resemble missiles; and yet, what do they do? They store food, they're the breadbasket of our livelihood. I like that irony, I want that feeling of an altercation with the land."

Working farms, subjects spreading a mile or more from view, an underlying quarrel between man and nature, plowing the soil to renew life. Beckman selects his Breughel-like panoramas while running the rolling country roads near his home. He then makes drawings and oil sketches on the site, and he employs the concentration of memory and imagination to realize in the studio the final image, which, like any of his figure paintings, evolves over many months. Like the figure paintings, too, the landscapes are frontal and accessible — a road, a fence, a furrow, or a string of electrical poles and wires greeting us at a picture's edge and allowing us to ease into and across the patiently described terrain. Accustomed to high-speed freeways and anonymous interstates, we find in these images a slower pace and a land that has retained its character in spite of human intrusion. So we pause regularly to absorb details of place and season, allowing them to accumulate, digesting them, feeling in the face of them — in the face of their inclusiveness and the spread of the formats that contain them — the fullness of nature's scale and the slow rhythm of its operations. Men live comfortably enough here, and certain of the passages hint at a seemingly pastoral accommodation of barns, silos, and tractors, but nature's is ultimately the larger force, its mood sounding the dominant chord above any particular site, its scope embracing with ease any of man's efforts to alter the horizon. That this is the case is nowhere more apparent than in Beckman's skies, which characteristically cover over half the surface of any given picture. They are invariably active, their wide range encompassing the tension of an approaching storm and the release of a passing front, the dust of summer heat and the clarity of autumnal cool, the weight of hibernal grey and the promise of vernal blue. They measure what goes on beneath them, and they shape its meaning. They have enabled the artist to broaden his palette, and they have equally provided a vast arena for the expression of his feelings. They are carefully observed and carefully rendered, qualities that inform everywhere their passion and intensity.

Though stamped with a clearly different signature, Gregory Gillespie's paintings resonate passion and intensity in measure equal to Beckman's, and Gillespie is quick to acknowledge that he has periodically felt pushed by his friend's pictorial achievements: "I was working pretty close, painting the hairs and the reflections and stuff like that, and then I'd go to his studio and I'd realize he was being more specific than me — he could paint the blond hair on his head or beard, and he could paint a whole room or a landscape reflected in the eyes. His focus and concentration are incredible. So you push your own limits, and you feel content with what you're doing; and then somebody else pushes it even further, and you realize the whole thing can go on and on and on, which is great."[2] Like Beckman, Gillespie learned his technique and found inspiration for it from the Old Masters. As he told Abram Lerner in a 1977 interview, "It was the North Italian painters I liked, and of course, Dürer, Grunewald. But it was the Northern Italians, like Mantegna, who affected me the most. My favorite Italian painter still is Carlo Crivelli . . . He's one of the few painters that you can look at and ask, 'Do you suppose that thing is real?' He has one painting where there is a hatchet in a saint's head, and the hatchet was sculpted in plaster of paris, actually modeled in relief. It's sculptural. But, you know, right next to it will be the hand, painted. Or the head. And both techniques work on the same perceptual level. He was that good. The relief became the standard he had to achieve in his rendering."[3] In the same conversation, Gillespie also reflected on his admiration for Flemish painting. "I remember a big painting in two parts by Petrus Christus I saw in Bruges. The first part shows the mayor of a town sitting on a throne and people are accusing him of taking a bribe. The second part of the painting shows his punishment — to be skinned alive. It was a huge painting, and it was meticulously done. It was *beautifully* done. Everybody's face, and every drop of blood. It showed he was still alive and they were ripping his skin off, and he's in terrible anguish, screaming. It has an impact. It wouldn't have an impact if it weren't well painted, you know, if somebody did the painting loose. But the contrast between the loving care of the technique and the subject matter has a very strong impact."[4]

Gillespie's study of the Old Masters took place for the most part in Europe. He attended classes at The Cooper Union in New York between 1954 and 1959, received bachelor of arts and master of fine arts degrees from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1962, and then moved to Italy, where he lived until returning to western Massachusetts in 1970. The opportunity to see an abundance of older art was only one impetus for the move abroad: "I just felt a real strong urge to be away from all influences and to start trying to figure it out. There was so much pressure in the art schools to perform, to come up with an identity, to come up with a style or something like that. You know how it is in art school, you're exposed to all of these different currents. When I got out of art school, it seemed like a natural period to be by myself and digest it — you know, years and years and years of people talking about art and just so much going on. It was around that time that I said I wasn't even going to read about art."

The paintings Gillespie made during the Italian years — human figures in landscape and urban settings, nudes in domestic interiors, shrine-like still lifes — are intense, highly personal, and charged with erotic overtones; but he was at the time as concerned with their execution as he was with their content: "I couldn't use the traditional technique of blending oil paint. If I put a squash or a rubber ball in front of me, I couldn't make it look round with the regular blending. I don't know why, but I just couldn't do it. But when I started learning the cross-hatching technique, that's when it opened up for me — to be able to paint what I saw in a really descriptive way — and that came from Crivelli, because he was a tempera painter. He painted apples and fruit and wreaths and stuff like that around the Virgin Mary and they look three-dimensional, and he did it with cross-hatching. When you go up and look at the thing close, it's obviously cross-hatching; but when you stand back, it's like BOOM! — it looks like a solid piece of sculpture. That's what I really wanted to do then: paint images in a convincing three-dimensional way."

Photographs were sometimes employed in the process of rendering the image, and the artist has used them off and on since the early sixties: "I think the first time I ever did it was when I was a student at San Francisco. I had a little black and white photo of my parents, or maybe it was my aunt and uncle, and I remember painting in black and white tempera on the black and white photograph. I changed things; I changed the expressions on the faces, and I put some things in the background. So it was like a photograph that had been altered, but it was not apparent. When people looked at it, they didn't know what it was — it just seemed like a very strange photograph." To equate Gillespie even remotely with photorealism, however, would be grossly inaccurate, for he has never felt restricted by the photographic sources he incorporates into his paintings. As he explained to Lerner, "I'd take a photograph from a newspaper or a magazine. And I would paint figures out — I would change the scene. I would 'Rorschach' into the scene, you know? Certain figures would be painted out, other figures would be left in. Then I would collage other figures in, so it would be composed. Then I would undress some of them. Or I would add things."[5] Nor does he resist the urge to follow directions suggested by the evolving picture itself. "It's not that clear when I begin a piece what anything will become. I know painters who work with a predetermined plan, painters who remain somehow detached. I can't paint like that. All of my paintings go through a lot of turmoil and change."

The sharp definition of Gillespie's paintings may belie the impulsiveness of his Dionysiac temperament and the importance that change occupies in his vision of the creative process. Photographs represent possibilities, not dictates; and the same holds for the wood panels on which he executes his exacting images: "The still life I just finished — through most of the painting, it was going to end right under the edge of the table. That's where the painting ended in my mind, and I was just going to saw the wood at that point. Then, during the last month or so, I decided I wanted to make it bigger. It was a feeling that it's alive, you know, that the concept didn't prevent some spontaneous change from happening. Wood gives me that range. I can saw it in half or I can add a foot to it, so any piece can grow. Wood gives me that freedom; and that's the feeling I like, that freedom to admit that what you were thinking yesterday, if not a mistake, was just yesterday's thought and there's no need to be stuck with it."

In a situation in which change is so important, and in which impulse is given such latitude, it is not surprising that working from direct observation is occasionally problematic for Gillespie, despite the fact that he is a master at it The difficulty has to do with his restlessness: "I have a real hard time sitting in front of a painting, sitting in front of anything, either a person or a still life, and just dealing with it from start to finish. But I have done it. The *Manikin Piece,* for instance — I made the setup, I put the mannikins on the table; and all I did for about six months was paint, looking at what was in front of me And I like the result. I mean, I love that painting, but I just didn't like the process. I found it really hard to go into the studio day after day and look at life and paint what I saw, look at life and paint what I saw There's not much invention, you know, not much room to play." Working with a model has also been troublesome from time to time: "It's difficult for me to work from a model, because there are so many extra problems. I often want to paint Peggy, and at first in our relationship it was a novelty and lots of fun for us to be together in the studio; but then, you know, she had her own work and so she wasn't always there, and the studio was cold and smelled bad to her, and sometimes the sitting wasn't as much fun even when we were feeling close. She wants it warmer than I want it, she gets bored and wants to read, and she's up on this platform and it's all very unnatural and cumbersome. So I use photographs, memory, and short sittings to create images of life, of her. It's easier. I have four or five pieces of her going now at the same time."

Thus, any one of Gillespie's paintings is likely to result from altering and manipulating photographs, from direct observation, and from imagination — what the artist calls play, "today's idea" instead of yesterday's. In the end, however, the image has to be convincing on multiple levels, only one of which is visual. "Fooling the eye is part of it, but it is the whole mind that has to be brought into the experience, so that momentarily you're convinced that what is real is not real and what is not real is real. *Just* fooling the eye isn't enough. The American trompe l'oeil painters, guys like Harnett, they paint a dollar bill, they paint fiddles and horns and rabbits, and somehow it remains trivial, you know, because I think on the psychological level there's no intensity. The objects look like props. The artists set out to convince the eye, and they do, but it's not enough. My work starts getting intense for me when it starts interconnecting on different psychological and emotional levels at once."

Change represents more in Gillespie's art than an aspect of the creative process that brings his pictures into being, just as the sharp focus of his images represents more than a breath-taking demonstration of his skill at rendering. They are bound one to the other, change being the underlying subject of the work, for it pervades the figures, the landscapes, and the still lifes — the highly descriptive ones and the more overtly fantastic ones alike. Each image pulses with tremulous energy, as if electrically charged, as if possessed, as if in another instant it could become something else. Gillespie's figures don't glance into our space, they stare, their intense gazes piercing our attention in order to focus on more remote worlds of private wonder that feel frozen in momentary equilibrium; his landscapes ripple with phantasmagoric detail, their organic constituents seeming to multiply before our eyes, their scale darting from the microscopic to the panoramic; and the objects in his still lifes, the squash, the rutabagas, and the tomatoes he takes from his garden, are no less dynamic, giving the appearance that they are about to burst or to creep elsewhere in the arrangement, their surfaces bulging, their roots and stems extending like tentacles toward the surfaces around them. Surrealism echoes here, but Gillespie's worlds are so utterly their own, the people and the objects in them so utterly bound to the visible, that they void Surrealism's pervasive theatricality; they have been called Gothic, for they are spiritually fervent, but their psychic throbs make them modern, reminding us that our relationship to the world is as tenuous and problematic as our relationships to one another. Fantasy and psychological tension are not exploited as objects in these pictures, not illustrated — as they are in Surrealism — nor is spiritual conviction taken for granted — as it could be in the Gothic; all such qualities have been wrested from the world and from the self and shaped anew, made personal — as they must be in the modern. The process of wresting and shaping is for Gillespie fraught with tension: hence, his figures and still lifes are regularly found compressed into corners of rooms or set against unyielding walls that spread across the picture surface and push relentlessly toward us, while his landscape horizons are elevated, causing nature to feel close, even claustrophobic; hence, too, the edge of fantasy in Gillespie's art, for it offers release.

The close rendering that characterizes Gillespie's work makes credible his vision of a changing and elusive reality, and it is, finally, a function of that vision. At close range, his cross-hatching technique mesmerizes us as it reveals itself, but it equally reveals what is depicted, for it atomizes the world and makes palpable the rush of cells through hand or eye, movements we know exist but can't ordinarily see. On this level, just inches from the surface, Gillespie's world becomes wildly and bewilderingly active, its elements streaming about as if they were driven by forces beyond the artist's control. We can step back, thereby restoring to the object the illusion of its solidity, but it will not necessarily come to rest, because Gillespie's line will continue to identify it and resist its desire — and our desire — for stability. That line, which anxiously cuts the edge of fruit or figure and tenaciously describes a box or bough, feels, even when arrow-straight, like a coiled serpent, alive, tensed, threatening, and only momentarily fixed. To attain release, we can retreat still further, to a point beyond a picture's magnetic range, a point that comfortably accommodates our conventional notions of the visible world and our conventionalized notions of realist art. To do so, however, is to forfeit the best of what this life and this art have to offer.

Ironic it is that we chronicle modern art in terms of styles and movements — Realism, Impressionism, Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, and the rest — because modern experience is by definition an individual search rather than a group effort. The movements we regularly speak of would in most cases be better described as brief alliances, poignant reminders of our desire to find communities where there are none, of our longing for encompassing ideological structures that no longer exist. But art-making is a lone effort, pursued in isolation in the confines of the studio, without mentors and without commonly acknowledged guidelines. We cite many of today's realist painters as being self-taught, which implies the separateness of their efforts and their alienation from tradition, but in doing so we overlook the fact that all of our artists are self-taught, each one required to find from within his or her own voice. Thus, it is not surprising that nearly all of the Abstract Expressionists denied being Abstract Expressionists, or that most of our realists resist being clustered under the banner of Realism. Identities are at stake, and the personal inflection means too much.

Certainly, Beckman and Gillespie fit the pattern, for neither cares much about realism as such, Realism as a movement. Each recognizes, however, that artists' claims are secured not through words but through works of art, and that works of art stand or fall not on the basis of stylistic identification but on the basis of quality. The ability to make convincing an exceptional vision of the world — a vision drawn from the self — is essential here, and it has nothing to do with realism or abstraction. It has to do with spirit and dedication, with paint and with feeling, and with a willingness to personalize them all. When it comes to that, the abstract artist may seem to enjoy an advantage, for what could abstract pictures be if not personal? Those areas of color, those brushstrokes — we've never seen them, they must have been invented, they *must* be personal. The rub, of course — the abstractionist's risk — is that the marks might remain personal, they might be *merely* personal, just decoration. The abstract artist's job, then, is to make them objective, which is where the realist begins and why he appears to be at a disadvantage. Those figures, those landscapes and those still life objects are so common, so regularly encountered — what could be personal about them? The realist, then, must seize the subject and impart personal dimensions to it, for a failure to do so will result in pictures that remain only objective, only factual, only illustrations. Beckman and Gillespie are both willing to personalize visible reality — which is why, for example, their many self-portraits are each so different: it's not just a matter of changing clothes, growing a beard, or even growing older — and both are willing to have their personalizations stand next to the objectified insights of the abstractionist tradition. Beckman may control, and Gillespie may rupture, but in the end it is painting that benefits — and us, for our knowledge of it, and of ourselves, is deepened by their achievements.

NOTES

1.
Quotes by William Beckman were taken from an interview with the artist at his Dutchess County home on December 12, 1983.

2.
Unless otherwise noted, quotes by Gregory Gillespie were taken from an interview with the artist at his western Massachusetts home on December 19, 1983.

3.
"An Interview with Gregory Gillespie" by Abram Lerner and Howard Fox, *Gregory Gillespie,* Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1977, page 22.

4
Ibid., page 23.

5.
Ibid., page 25.

LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

Stephen Alpert

Robert Arneson
and Sandra
Shannonhouse

Richard Brown
Baker Collection,
New York

First Bank Systems,
Minneapolis

Forum Gallery,
New York

Allan Frumkin
Gallery, New York

Gallery Claude
Bernard, Inc.

Hirshhorn
Museum and
Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian
Institution

Malcolm Holzman

Robert and
Frances Kohler

Morton A. Kornreich

Ms. Palmer Lane

Sydney and Frances
Lewis Collection

The Metropolitan
Museum of Art

Museum of Fine
Arts, Boston

New Britain
Museum of
American Art

Parasol Press, Ltd.

Edmund Pillsbury,
Fort Worth

The Herbert W.
Plimpton Foundation

Allan Stone Gallery,
New York

Linda E.A.
Wachtmeister and
Robert L. Strini

CATALOG OF THE EXHIBITION

1.
Diana Pregnant

1969
Mixed media
11 x 11 x
7½ inches
Courtesy Allan
Stone Gallery,
New York

2.
Hudson River

1969
Mixed media
10½ x 10½ x
10½ inches
Courtesy Allan
Stone Gallery,
New York

3
Self-Portrait
with Beret

1970
Oil on panel
10 x 8 inches
Courtesy Allan
Stone Gallery,
New York

4.
Family (Triptych)

1971
Oil on
walnut panels
20 x 40 inches
Private Collection

5.
Self-Portrait

1972
Oil on panel
14 x 12 inches
Collection
Morton A. Kornreich

6.
Self-Portrait

1974
Oil and tempera
on wood
72 x 48 inches
Collection
Edmund Pillsbury,
Fort Worth

7
Self-Portrait

1976
Oil on panel
11¼ x 9¼ inches
Private Collection,
Greenwich,
Connecticut

8.
Diana III

1976
Oil on panel
74 x 51 inches
Private Collection

9.
Parshall's Farm

1977
Oil on canvas
63 x 72 inches
Collection
Malcolm Holzman

10.
Double Nude
(Diana and William
Beckman)

1978
Oil on birch panel
59½ x 55½ inches
The Herbert
W. Plimpton
Foundation, on
extended loan
to the Rose
Art Museum,
Brandeis University

11.
Self-Portrait

1978
Oil on panel
16¼ x 13⅜ inches
Private Collection

12.
Combining,
Minnesota
(My Father
Combining)

1979
Pastel on paper
30 x 60 inches
Private Collection,
Boston

13.
Diana and Deidra

1980
Oil on panel
84 x 60 inches
Courtesy Allan
Stone Gallery,
New York

WILLIAM
BECKMAN

14.
Self-Portrait

1980
Oil on panel
15¼ x 13¼ inches
Parasol
Press, Ltd.

15.
Diana IV

1980
Charcoal
on paper
84 x 48 inches
Collection
Robert Arneson
and Sandra
Shannonhouse

16.
Diana IV

1981
Oil on panel
84½ x 51 inches
Gallery Claude
Bernard, Inc.

17.
Rally A Farm

1981
Pastel on paper
26 x 56 inches
Collection
Stephen Alpert

18.
Self-Portrait

1982
Oil on panel
50 x 36½ inches
Richard
Brown Baker
Collection,
New York

19.
Baldwin Farm

1982
Pastel and oil on
museum board
40¼ x 74½ inches
Courtesy
Allan Frumkin
Gallery, New
York

20.
H.G. Page
Lumberyard

1983
Pastel on paper
25 x 57 inches
Collection
Malcolm Holzman

21.
Delavern Farm,
Winter

1983
Pastel on paper
40¼ x 80½ inches
New Britain
Museum of
American Art

22.
Self-Portrait (In
Down Jacket)

1983
Charcoal
on paper
60 x 45 inches
Private Collection,
Florida

23.
A Gravel Road
One Mile North and
One-half Mile West
of Maynard,
Minnesota

1983–84
Oil on canvas
76 x 144 inches
Collection
First Bank Systems,
Minneapolis

24
The Building
of a New
Milk Barn

1983–84
Oil on paper
mounted on canvas
48¼ x 84¼ inches
Courtesy
Allan Frumkin
Gallery, New
York

GREGORY
GILLESPIE

1.
Naples Shrine

1969
Mixed media
72 x 48 inches
Private Collection

2.
Pumice Box
and Orange
Meditation Piece

1971
Oil and magna
on wood
28 x 33 inches
Collection Joseph
Feury and Lee Grant

3.
Beetle
and Frog

1972
Oil on board
8 x 12 inches
Collection Robert
and Frances Kohler

4
Studio Still Life

1973
Oil and magna
on wood
38 x 34 inches
Private Collection

5.
Snake Painting

1973
Oil and magna
on wood
9¾ x 10 inches
Private Collection,
Boston

6.
White Abstract
(Celestial Light)

1973
Mixed media
10 x 19½ inches
Courtesy Allan
Stone Gallery,
New York

7.
Still Life with
Squash and
Rutabagas

1975
Oil and magna and
pencil on plywood
50 x 41⅛ inches
Hirshhorn
Museum and
Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian
Institution

8.
Woods with Birch
Trees

1976
Mixed media
13½ x 10¼ inches
Collection Linda
E.A. Wachtmeister
and Robert L. Strini

9.
Self-Portrait in
Studio

1976–77
Oil and magna
on wood
63 x 48 inches
Private Collection
c/o Forum Gallery,
New York

10
Self-Portrait II

1976–77
Mixed media
on masonite
30 x 24½ inches
The Herbert
W. Plimpton
Foundation, on
extended loan
to the Rose Art
Museum, Brandeis
University

11.
Back Door

1978
Oil on board
3¾ x 5 inches
Private Collection

12.
Self-Portrait

1978
Oil on board
24¾ x 21 inches
Private Collection

13.
Self-Portrait
with Blue Visor

1979
Oil on paper
21 x 16½ inches
Courtesy Allan
Stone Gallery,
New York

14.
Man, Woman,
Bed, Red Wall

1968–79
Mixed media
14 x 11 inches
Private Collection

15.
Mechanical Man

1979
Mixed media and oil on board
40 x 26¼ inches
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

16.
Two Oriental Women With Ancestral Spirits Teeming Around Them

1979
Mixed media
10½ x 8¾ inches
Collection Ms. Palmer Lane

17.
Landscape With Islands and Sky

1979
Oil and enamel on particle board
12⅛ x 35⅞ inches
Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Charles Wilmers

18.
Double Green Landscape

1979–80
Mixed media
13¾ x 26½ inches
Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection

19.
Manikin Piece

1980
Oil and alkyd on board
36 x 48 inches
Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection

20.
Interior (Man Seated Next To A Window)

1980–81
Mixed media
18 x 15⅞ inches
Private Collection c/o Forum Gallery, New York

21.
Dog and Doll in Room

1980–81
Mixed media
25 x 31 inches
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

22.
Portrait of Peg

1980–81
Oil on board
18¾ x 18 inches
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

23.
Myself Painting a Self-Portrait

1980–81
Oil, alkyd, pencil, crayon, conte crayon, wood, felt-tipped pen and ink, ballpoint pen and ink, masking tape, and photochemical reproduction on wood
58⅛ x 68¾ inches
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution

24.
Untitled Landscape (after de Hooch)

1981
Mixed media on board
13½ x 9½ inches
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

25.
Self-Portrait

1981
Oil and mixed media on paper laid down on board
24 x 19 inches
Private Collection c/o Forum Gallery, New York

26.
The Stroller,
Paradise Walk

1980–82
Oil on board
14¼ x 44 inches
Private Collection
c/o Forum Gallery,
New York

27.
Self-Portrait

1982
Mixed media
on panel
19¾ x 21 inches
Courtesy Forum
Gallery, New York

28.
Portrait of
a Painter

1982–83
Oil and alkyd
on board
23¼ x 19½ inches
Private Collection
c/o Forum Gallery,
New York

29.
Portrait of Vincent

1981–83
Oil and alkyd
on board
21 x 22 inches
Parasol
Press, Ltd.

30.
Peggy Seated
(Imaginary
Pregnancy)

1982–83
Oil and alkyd
on brown paper
glued to masonite
46⅛ x 45⅞ inches
Museum of Fine
Arts, Boston,
The Hayden
Collection

31.
Still Life with
Eggplants

1983
Mixed media
on panel
41¼ x 30⅛ inches
Private Collection

32.
Studio Corner

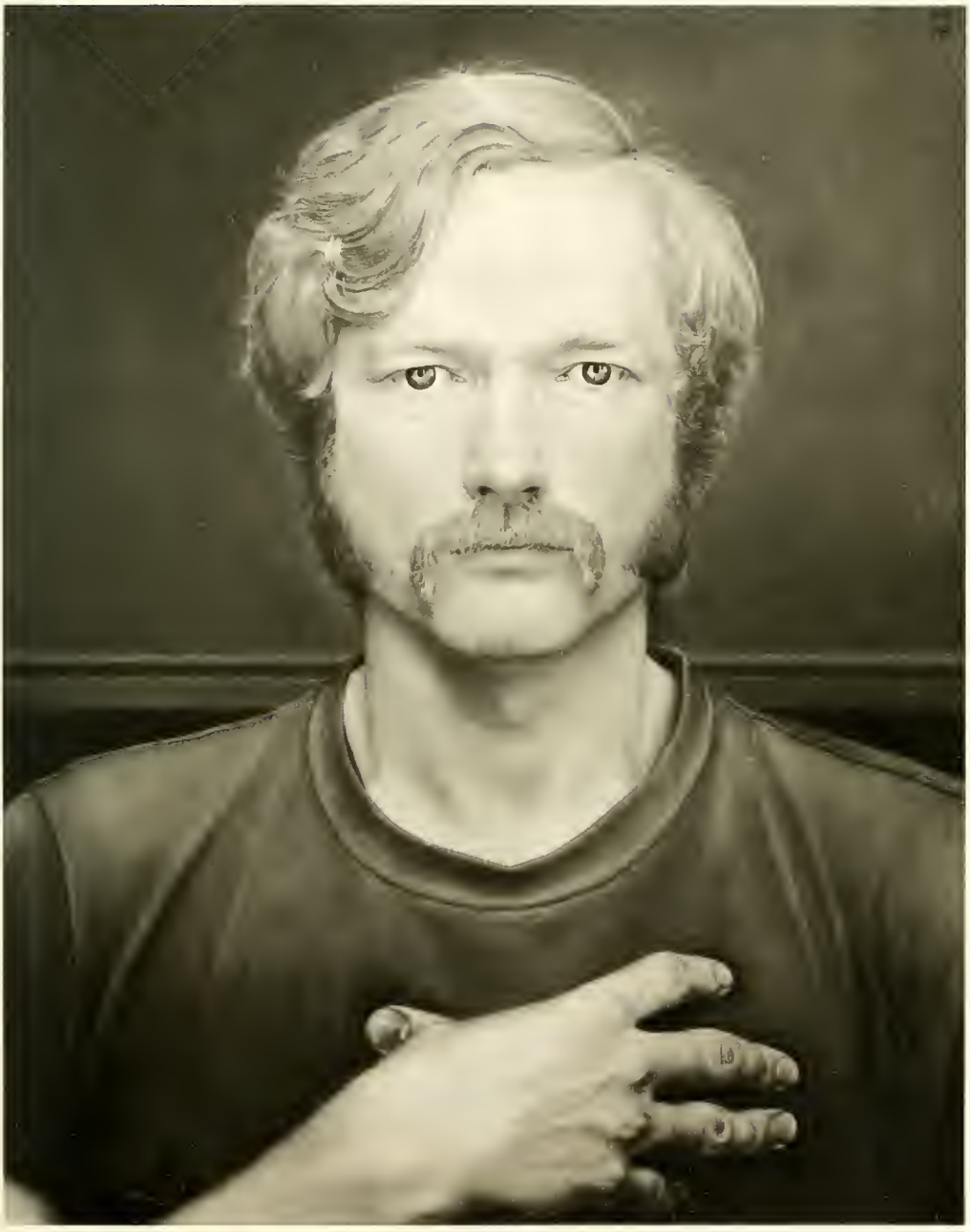
1984
Mixed media
108 x 108 x
48 inches
Courtesy Forum
Gallery, New York

33
Smiling
Self-Portrait

1983–84
Oil on alkyd
on canvas on board
36½ x 24½ inches
Private Collection

WILLIAM
BECKMAN

SELF-PORTRAIT



1972
Oil on panel
14 x 12 inches
Collection
Morton A. Kornreich

SELF-PORTRAIT

1974
Oil and tempera
on wood
72 x 48 inches
Collection
Edmund Pillsbury,
Fort Worth

SELF-PORTRAIT

1976
Oil on panel
11¼ x 9¼ inches
Private Collection,
Greenwich,
Connecticut

DIANA III

1976
Oil on panel
74 x 51 inches
Private Collection

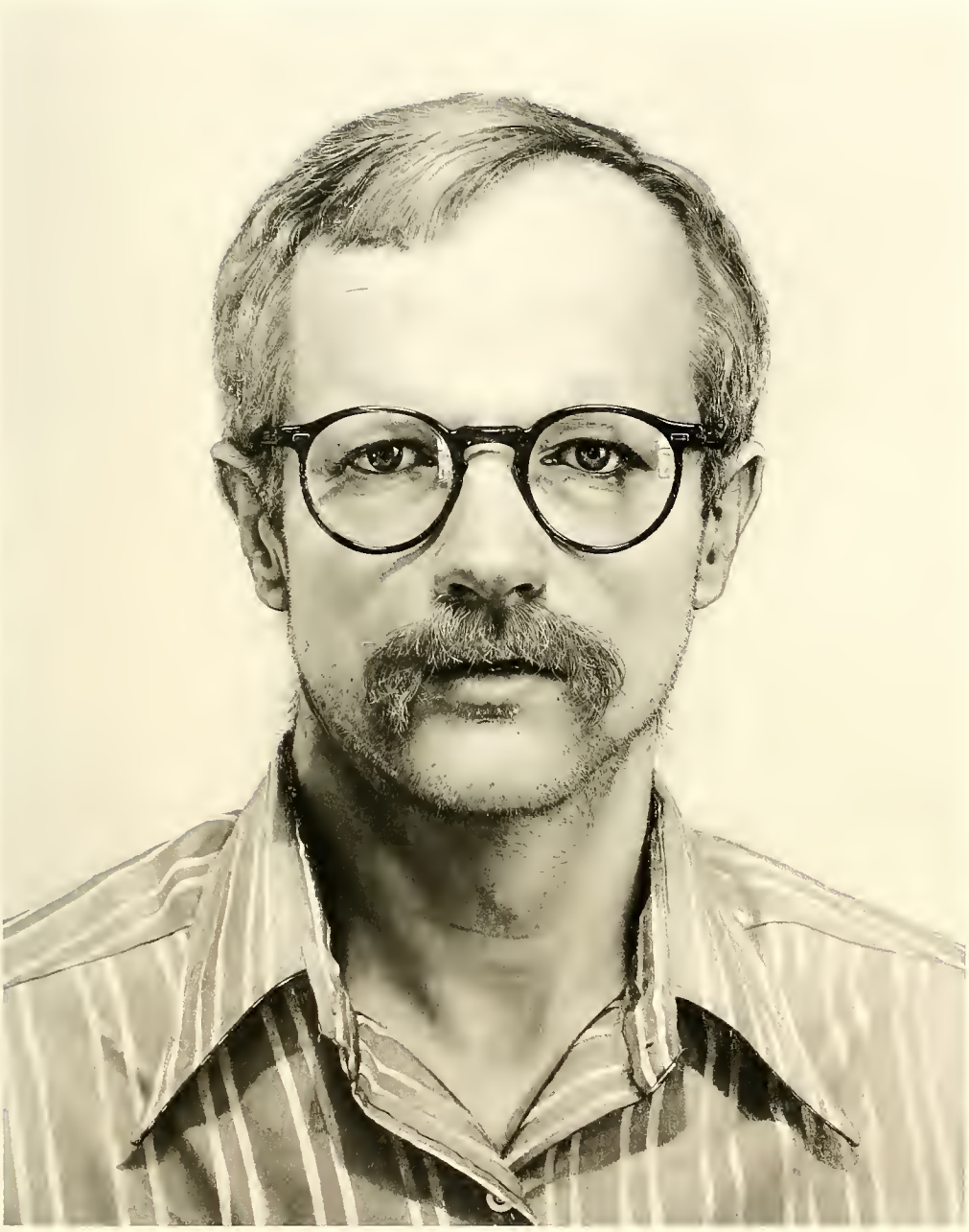
PARSHALL'S
FARM

1977
Oil on canvas
63 x 72 inches
Collection
Malcolm Holzman

DOUBLE NUDE
(DIANA AND
WILLIAM
BECKMAN)

1978
Oil on birch panel
59½ x 55½ inches
The Herbert
W. Plimpton
Foundation, on
extended loan
to the Rose Art
Museum,
Brandeis University

SELF-PORTRAIT



1978
Oil on panel
16¼ x 13⅜ inches
Private Collection

SELF-PORTRAIT

1980
Oil on panel
15¼ x 13¼ inches
Parasol Press, Ltd.

DIANA IV

1980
Charcoal on paper
84 x 48 inches
Collection
Robert Arneson and
Sandra Shannonhouse

DIANA IV

1981
Oil on panel
84½ x 51 inches
Gallery Claude
Bernard

RALLY A FARM

1981
Pastel on paper
26 x 56 inches
Collection
Stephen Alpert

SELF-PORTRAIT

1982
Oil on panel
50 x 36½ inches
Richard Brown
Baker Collection,
New York

BALDWIN FARM

1982
Pastel and oil on
museum board
40¼ x 74½ inches
Courtesy
Allan Frumkin Gallery,
New York

H.G. PAGE
LUMBERYARD

1983
Pastel on paper
25 x 57 inches
Collection
Malcolm Holzman

DELAVERN
FARM, WINTER

1983
Pastel on paper
40¼ x 80½ inches
New Britain
Museum of
American Art

SELF-PORTRAIT
(IN DOWN JACKET)

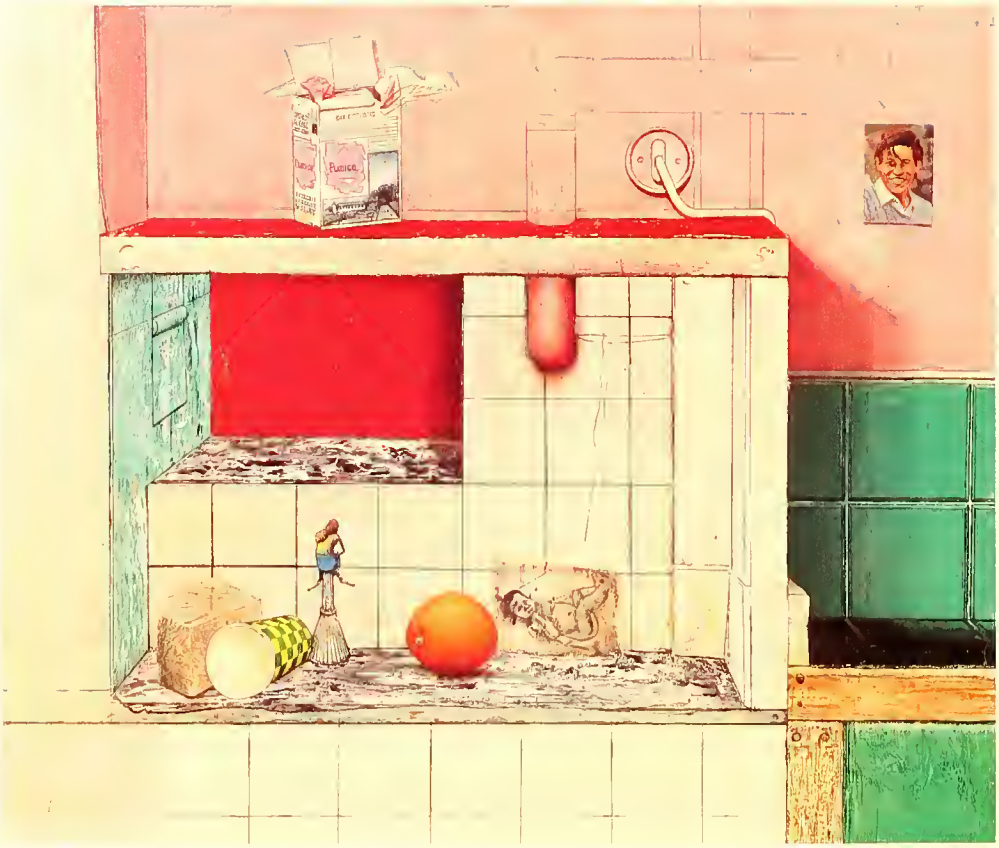
1983
Charcoal on paper
60 x 45 inches
Private Collection,
Florida

GREGORY
GILLESPIE

NAPLES SHRINE

1969
Mixed media
72 x 48 inches
Private Collection

PUMICE BOX
AND ORANGE
MEDITATION
PIECE



1971
Oil and magna
on wood
28 x 33 inches
Collection
Joseph Feury and
Lee Grant

BEETLE
AND FROG

1972
Oil on board
8 x 12 inches
Collection
Robert and
Frances Kohler

SNAKE PAINTING

1973
Oil and magna
on wood
9¾ x 10 inches
Private Collection,
Boston

STILL LIFE WITH
SQUASH AND
RUTABAGAS

1975
Oil and magna and
pencil on plywood
50 x 41⅛ inches
Hirshhorn
Museum and
Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian
Institution

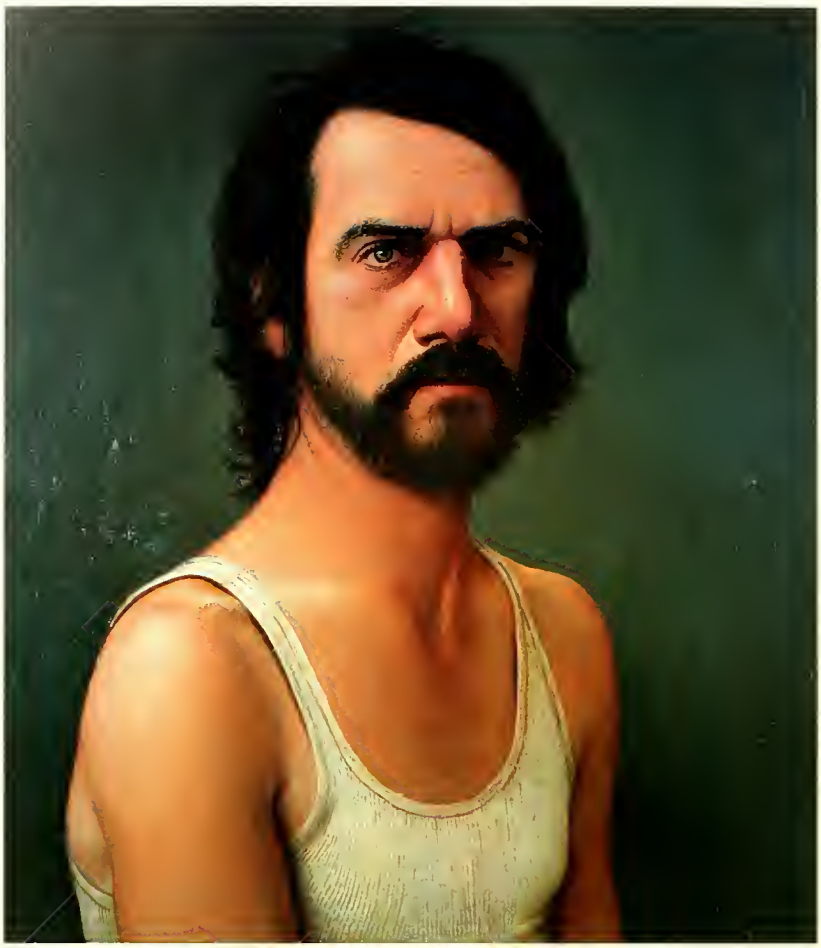
SELF-PORTRAIT
IN STUDIO

1976–77
Oil and magna
on wood
63 x 48 inches
Private Collection
c/o Forum Gallery,
New York

SELF-PORTRAIT II

1976–77 Mixed media on masonite 30 x 24½ inches The Herbert W. Plimpton Foundation, on extended loan to the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University

SELF-PORTRAIT



1978
Oil on board
24¾ x 21 inches
Private Collection

MAN, WOMAN,
BED, RED WALL

1968–79
Mixed media
14 x 11 inches
Private Collection

DOUBLE GREEN
LANDSCAPE

1979–80
Mixed media
13¾ x 26½ inches
Sydney and Frances
Lewis Collection

MANIKIN PIECE

1980
Oil and alkyd
on board
36 x 48 inches
Sydney and Frances
Lewis Collection

INTERIOR
(MAN SEATED
NEXT TO
A WINDOW)

1980–81
Mixed media
18 x 15⅞ inches
Courtesy
Forum Gallery,
New York

PORTRAIT OF PEG

1980–81
Oil on board
18¾ x 18 inches
Courtesy
Forum Gallery,
New York

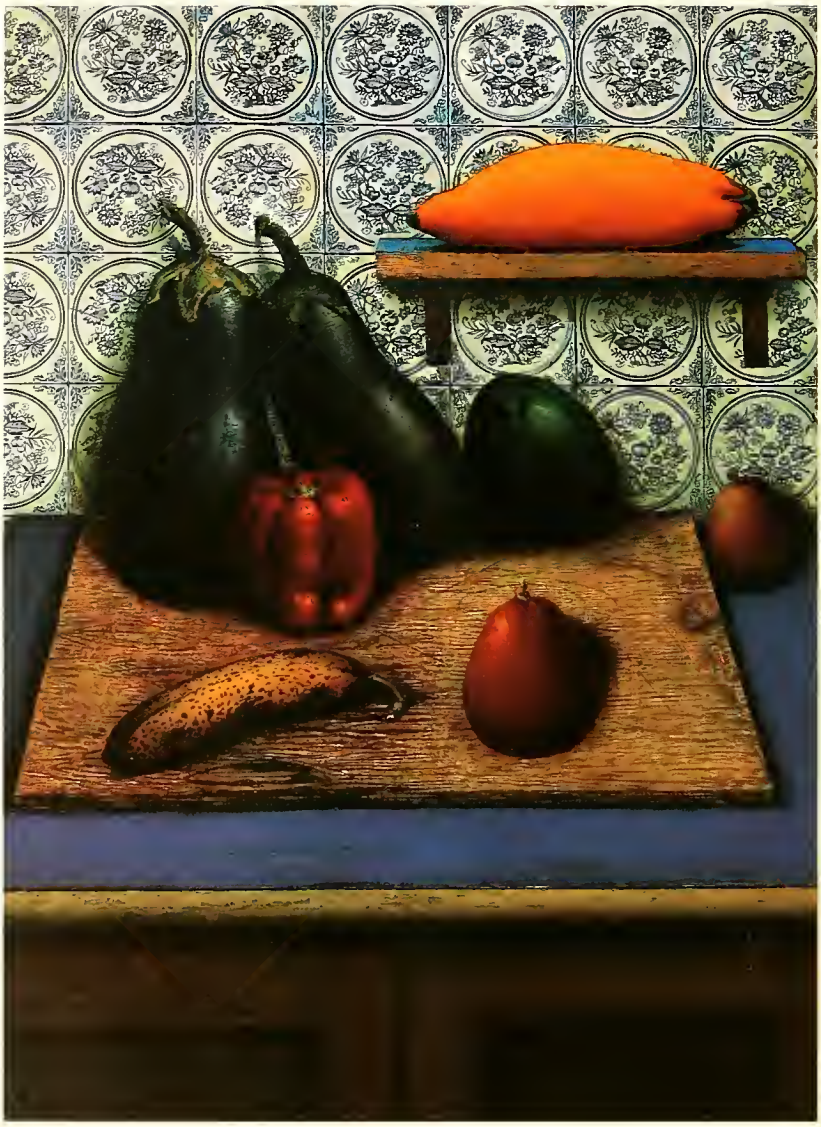
MYSELF PAINTING
A SELF-PORTRAIT

1980–81
Oil, alkyd, pencil, crayon, conte crayon, wood, felt-tipped pen and ink, ballpoint pen and ink, masking tape, and photochemical reproduction on wood
58⅛ x 68¾ inches
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution

UNTITLED
LANDSCAPE
(AFTER DE HOOCH)

1981
Mixed media on board
13½ x 9½ inches
Courtesy
Forum Gallery,
New York

STILL LIFE WITH
EGGPLANTS



1983
Mixed media
on panel
41¼ x 30⅛ inches
Private Collection